

IN BETWEEN SPORTS AND STUDY: GETTING TO KNOW STUDENT ATHLETES BETTER

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Abstract The purpose of this study was to explore adolescent athletes' perceptions of demands, challenges, and adversities they face in their combination of sports and study. The holistic athletic career model (Wylleman, Reints, De Knop, 2013) was used as a theoretical framework. 22 talented adolescent male and female athletes participated in semi-structured interviews to discuss their perceived demands and challenges in their combination of sport and study. Participants expressed their strong commitment to both, sports and education. In comparison with male athletes, female adolescent athletes expressed a greater level of dissatisfaction with their athletic work, strong educational motivation together with highly perceived school-induced stress. Peers (schoolmates, teammates, non-athletic friends) were identified as very influential for young athletes, serving as a source of both, positive as well as negative experiences. Study findings support taking a holistic approach when educating and working with adolescent athletes.

Keywords:

adolescence,
athletes,
career
development,
gender,
qualitative study

1 Introduction

Over the past decades, research about athletic career development has substantially increased and its focus has been shifted from singular athletic career transitions (e.g., sports career termination) into a holistic, lifespan, multi-level approach (Stambulova et al., 2009). Greater knowledge about athletes' career development resulted in several proposed models of athletic career (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Stambulova, 1994; Stambulova, 2003; Stambulova, 2000; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). These models define the athletic career as a succession of stages, which represent a general pattern in the careers of athletes from different types of sports, nationalities, as well as genders. One of the most comprehensive models describing athletic career development is the Holistic athletic career model (Wylleman, et. al. 2013). Following the 'whole-person' and 'whole-career' approach, the model describes characteristics and types of transitions athletes may deal with throughout their athletic career development on different levels of their life, i.e. athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, and financial levels. Career development is described as multifaceted; therefore the athlete is viewed as a person who is engaged not only in sport but also in other life domains (e.g., studies, family, peer relationships). In this essence, athletic career transitions are always related to developmental challenges and transitions in other spheres of athletes' lives (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The holistic athletic career model (Wylleman et al., 2013) divides athletic career into stages that necessarily follow one another: initiation stage, when the athlete is introduced to sports; development stage, when the level of athletic engagement intensifies; mastery stage, in which the athlete reaches the highest level of his/her performance; and discontinuation stage, which reflects the athlete's process of retirement from competitive sport.

During the development stage of athletic development, which usually starts around the age of 15, the athletes narrow their interest in one or two sports and intensify their athletic work by focusing increasingly on the improvement of skills and techniques (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). In this period, some of the athletes are recognized as being talented, and the importance of competitions increases. At the academic level, athletes make the transition from primary to secondary school, which is connected to several changes (e.g., in contact with friends, changes in peer social networks, changes in the combination of school and sport, reduction in after-school activities) (Reints, 2011; Salmela, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004, Wylleman et al.,

2013). In this stage of an athletic career, athletes are in their adolescence, which begins with biological transitions (e.g., puberty) and ends with cultural and sociological transitions (e.g., enactment of adult roles in society) (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). In the last decade, however, a new term ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2000) has been used to conceptualize the lives of people from their late teens to their mid-to-late 20s in industrialized societies. This developmental period is a phase of the life span between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood. Adolescence brings significant changes in social, emotional, and cognitive functioning (Arnett, 2004); and represents a critical period of an individual’s growth and development in which he/she can acquire the skills, attitudes, and behaviors important for later adulthood (Lerner & Steinberg, 2004). It represents a phase of identity exploration and gaining autonomy, and is accompanied by significant changes in athletes’ social interactions (Reints, 2011; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). In adolescence, individuals form their self-identity, as well as gain some independence from parents, and shift their social focus to peer groups and adults outside the family (Eccles, 1999; Erikson, 1968).

A particular area of concern in adolescent athletic career development is youth sport dropout (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008a). Dropping out of a sport refers to the premature termination of an athletic career before the athlete reaches his/her peak performance level in the respective sport (Alferman & Stambulova, 2007). It appears that adolescent athletes are an age group of athletes, particularly at risk for dropping out of the sport for two major groups of reasons: (1) in the development stage, demands of school and their particular sport are increasing; which may lead to the decision to prioritize school education and quit sport; (2) at the end of puberty, performance slumps may occur because there are no longer performance gains due to biological development (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015). In their prospective study of talented adolescent German athletes, Baron-Thiene and Alfermann (2015) found that almost 30% of adolescent athletes prematurely terminated their sports career within the course of one year. Physical complaints (injuries, higher level of exhaustion, loss of fitness) appeared to be an important reason for dropping out of sport; while higher win motivation and better self-optimization skills supported and enhanced career persistence. Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008b) found that adolescent athletes who dropped out of competitive sports reported having no opportunities for other activities, received limited one-on-one coaching, perceived a lack of athletic peers, rivalries with their siblings, and pressure for sport from their parents. On the other hand, engaged adolescent athletes reported opportunities for other activities,

received one-on-one coaching, had good relationships with their parents, and perceived the positive influence of their friends and siblings. In another study based on findings about dropout and engaged adolescent athletes, Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) found that sports involvement can facilitate many positive developmental experiences for young athletes, i.e., related to challenge, meaningful adult and peer relationships, a sense of community, and other life experiences. However, according to dropout adolescent athletes, athletic engagement can also cause some negative developmental experiences, i.e., related to poor coach relationships, negative peer influences, parent pressure, and the challenging psychological environment of competitive sport. Weiss and Ferrer-Caja (2002) found that motivational outcomes linked with higher adolescent athletes' commitment to the sport were: enjoyment of the sport, positive self-perceptions, and an intrinsic motivational orientation. Unlike that, lower commitment to the sport was connected to perceived stress, lower self-perceptions, and lower motivation. According to Weiss (2000), three major motives for adolescents' continuation in sport are: (1) developing and demonstrating physical competence (e.g., athletic skills, physical fitness, and physical appearance); (2) gaining social acceptance and support (friendships, peer group acceptance, and approval and encouragement from significant others); and (3) enjoyment of the sport.

Gender differences can be noticed in adolescent participation in sport and physical activities, with adolescent girls participating in organized sport at a lower rate than boys (e.g., Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Female adolescent athletes also tend to drop out of sport more often than male adolescent athletes, and at earlier ages (Kirshnit, Keathley, Himelein, & Srigley, 1989). According to Slater and Tiggemann (2011), there are several potential reasons for the observed gender differences in adolescent sport participation, including differences in the availability of sporting options and gender role expectations. Girls stressed that although more sporting opportunities are available for girls than before, general society still reinforces the philosophy that sport and physical activities are masculine pursuits. In a study about reasons for adolescent girls withdrawing from sport (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011), several gender-specific reasons for girls' declining rates of participation in sport and physical activity were identified, i.e. losing interest, lack of competence, and insufficient time. The authors explained that during adolescence the importance of femininity and feminine behavior is heightened for girls, and playing sport begins to appear incompatible with femininity. Gender role expectations seem to create an additional

barrier for girls to participate in sport, since adolescent girls were found to see sport engagement as not being „cool“ or feminine (Choi, 2000). In a study about the career development of female soccer players (Gledhill & Harwood, 2015), female athletes expressed having a role conflict between their role as a female soccer player and their role as an adolescent women. Appearance and body image concerns appear as relevant topics for adolescent athletes. Girls were found to express concerns about their appearance and image while playing a sport, as well as concerns over how their bodies might appear in particular sporting uniforms (Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). Differences appear also in adolescent athletes' perceptions of an ideal body: while adolescent boys expressed a general desire to be strong and muscular, girl athletes believed that the ideal female body, in contrast, should not have much muscle, and expressed a fear of becoming too muscly (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2006; Krane et al., 2004, Slater & Tiggemann, 2010; Tekavc & Wylleman, 2015). Several adversities were found as being more prevalent among adolescent female athletes in comparison to their male counterparts, e.g. higher levels of exhaustion and physical discomfort (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015), greater risk for injuries (e.g., Clement et al., 2012; Granito, 2002), and higher prevalence of eating disorders (Bratland-Sanda & Sundgot-Borgen, 2013).

A few studies stressed the importance of psychosocial factors, such as support from parents, coaches, teachers, team-mates, peers, and siblings on the development of adolescent female athletes (e.g., Gledhill & Harwood, 2014; 2015; Tekavc et al., 2014). To facilitate optimal talent development for young female athletes, multiple social agents need to optimally interact. Research suggests that social interaction with peers (both, athletic and non-athletic) seems to be especially important for adolescent female athletes; for example, in Slater and Tiggermann's study (2010), girls expressed the belief that socializing and having free time was more important for girls than for boys and thus may impact on girl's decision to play sport (Slater & Tiggermann, 2010).

Although models of athletic career development do not differ between female and male athletes and predict a similar career path for both, research suggests that female and male athletes will typically have qualitatively different developmental experiences (e.g., Gill, 2001). In this essence, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the impact of gender on adolescent athletes' perceptions of their athletic careers. Our goal was to compare the perceived demands, challenges, and

adversities male and female adolescent athletes in the development stage of athletic career face in different spheres of their life.

2 Method

2.1 Design

In order to investigate the multilevel challenges and difficulties that young athletes face in the development stage of their athletic career, qualitative data gathering with the use of semi-structured interviews was selected. This enabled a full exploration and a better understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences of adversities (Kvale & Birkmann, 2008). The holistic athletic career model (Wylleman et al., 2013) was used as a theoretical framework for this study, guiding the formulation of interview questions and data interpretation.

2.2 Participants

22 junior level talented young athletes (11 males, 11 females) were selected based on recognition as being talented by their sports federations. At the time of the interview, the participants were between 15 and 17 years of age ($M = 16.5$ years, $SD = 0.51$). All of the participants were enrolled in a selected sports department at one of the high schools in Slovenia, which offers dual career programs for student athletes. In comparison with regular secondary school programs in Slovenia, such dual career programs for student athletes include a higher level of physical activity in terms of quantity and quality; certain academic modifications, e.g. e-learning, an extension of education when needed; and coordination between academic and athletic activities.

2.3 Interview guide

In accordance with the holistic perspective (Wylleman et al., 2013), the interview guide was developed to allow the participants to describe the adversities they face as athletes from a whole-person perspective. The interview guide was divided into six sections. The first section introduced the purpose of the study to the participants, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and the precautions taken about the treatment of data, participant anonymity, and confidentiality. In the second section of the interview guide, the participants were asked to provide information

about their age, type of sport, years in the sport, level achieved, school program they were involved in, and categorization status. Sections three to six represented the main part of the interview and asked questions about the challenges and difficulties the athletes were currently facing at the specific level of their development (i.e., the athletic, psychological, psychosocial, and academic levels).

2.4 Procedure and data analysis

In the beginning process of data gathering, we turned to Slovene Sports Association (SSA) asking them to cooperate with the participants' gathering. SSA sent email invitations to all junior-level athletes ages ranging from 15 to 17 years, involved in secondary level education sports departments, who obtained a categorization status A or B; inviting them to take part in a study about athletic career development. For those who were willing to participate, the first author scheduled with them a date for an interview arranged at a mutually convenient time and location. In total, 22 semi-structured face-to-face interviews took place and were conducted by the first author. Although the interviews were semi-structured, the order of sections and questions varied in accordance with the course of the conversation. Also, probes and prompts were used in addition to the interview guide questions to clarify and elaborate on specific points given by the athletes. All interviews were digitally recorded with participants' permission and lasted between 41 and 72 minutes. They were transcribed verbatim, yielding 264 pages of single-line spaced text.

Framework analysis (Spencer et al., 2014) was used to analyze the data. To ensure familiarization with the text, the transcripts were read several times by the first author and initial comments and relevant themes were written. Then, each theme was placed into one of the five levels of the Holistic athletic career model (Wylleman et al., 2013); i.e. athletic level, psychological level, psychosocial level, academic/vocational level, and financial level. Afterward, data contained within each theme was reviewed again to ensure that they have been arranged correctly. The analysis was finalized by a table of themes for each level of athletic career development. Relevant quotations representing good examples for each theme in the study were selected, with some of them later used in the presentation of results.

3 Results

3.1 Athletic level

The athletes pointed to several inadequacies which they perceived in their athletic work. Both, male and female athletes complained about too high athletic demands they need to face, e.g. having too intensive training, and/or too much training per week. Only females complained about the training regime; describing it as too monotonous, not individual enough, and/or not frequent enough to enable them a progression in their athletic performance. Some of the athletes were dissatisfied with the training facilities or daily travels they needed to do to get to their training center. Almost half of the athletes (more females) mentioned missing additional professional support with regards to their athletic career; they mainly identified a physiotherapist, nutritionist, dual career support provider, and an additional coach as such much-needed additional professionals.

Young athletes reported taking insufficient rest; and as a consequence, frequently facing both, physical and mental exhaustion. They complained about not having enough time to rest, facing a lack of sleep, and being frequently tired, especially during stressful periods in school or after important competitions. Female athletes more often declared these problems of insufficient rest and exhaustion. One of them illustrated her frequent exhaustion with the following quote:

Often, I feel exhausted; especially when I have a lot to study for school and have consequently less time to rest. With having two trainings daily, I am tired from both – from school and sport. When in class, it happens to me that I close my eyes and let myself be carried away for a few moments... (Female judoka)

More than three-quarters of the participants suffered from at least one sports injury which disabled them from normal athletic work for a certain period of time. Two female athletes experienced burnout in their recent athletic careers. One of them described this episode with the following quote:

I was tired all the time. I felt like I could sleep for 12 or more hours and not wake up fully rested. My concentration in school decreased, and I had trouble following the lectures. Also, I was sick all the time, like twice per month or so... (Female swimmer)

Young athletes noticed physical changes in the maturation process they were facing and their impacts on their athletic performance. One of the male athletes complained about his later physical development in comparison with other athletes of the same age, which made him less competitive against his mature opponents. Unlike males, female athletes frequently expressed their dissatisfaction with increased body weight and their body composition changes (e.g., increase of fat mass, increased hip circumference). Besides being dissatisfied with these physical changes, female athletes also reported how these changes had negatively impacted their athletic career performance by causing a different weight distribution, coordination difficulties, decrease in flexibility, and loss of explosiveness; all of this resulted in a temporary decrease or stagnation of their athletic results. Female athletes expressed their regrets of not being informed and/or not being prepared in advance about the negative impacts of these normal developmental changes. As illustrated:

While boys are making constant progress as they gain weight, we girls don't. I stagnate on my results for almost a year now. It is quite difficult for me; it frustrates me that I don't make any progress despite all the training and exhaustion I go through. (Female swimmer)

When talking about nutrition (i.e., meal distribution and food selection), three female athletes reported having trouble with keeping (what they understood as) a healthy diet. Athletes who were involved in a type of sport where a special focus is placed on athletes' weight (i.e., judo, taekwondo), reported being frequently under pressure to keep their competitive weight. When trying to reach their target competitive weight, they were forced into strict dieting behavior, which resulted in being hungry, thirsty, and feeling without energy. A female taekwondo athlete illustrated this with the following quote:

You come on a training feeling tired, hungry, thirsty... Your legs feel sore, you are grumpy and absent-minded. In such moments, you would rather skip the training; however, you know that without practice you won't be able to get rid of that last kilogram you still need to lose before the competition.

3.2 Psychological level

Adolescent athletes spoke about the stress they perceived in their lives and identified several sources of stress, connected with their athletic engagement, school obligations, and the difficult combination of both domains. Athletic sources of stress were most often represented by fear of poor performance, and a pressure to succeed coming from different agents, i.e. themselves, their coach, or other people (i.e., parents, peers). Female athletes more often reported being under pressure because of their coach's high expectations of them. Also, they expressed being concerned by the possibility of disappointing others (i.e., parents, coach) with their poor athletic performance; or worrying about what other people, especially their peers, would think about them as athletes, as suggested by the following quote:

For me, the most difficult part of being an athlete is dealing with the possibility of disappointing others with my bad performance, especially my mom and dad. (Female golf player)

For the majority of athletes in this sample, school represented their major source of stress. Gender differences however appeared, with female athletes more often expressing school-connected stress than males, e.g. worrying about school grades.

Female athletes more often than male athletes talked about facing different psychological difficulties. They reported: (1) concentration problems, e.g. struggling to stay focused in sport and/or school, being easily distracted, and/or noticing how daily hassles often negatively influence their athletic performance; (2) motivation difficulties, e.g. fluctuations in their athletic motivation; (3) mood disturbances, e.g. sudden mood changes, emotional instability, impacts of their daily mood on their athletic performance. One of the female athletes illustrated her mood disturbances with the following quote:

Often, I wake up feeling good. But then one little thing would happen and my mood would change completely. That frustrates me because I feel like I cannot control my emotions. (Female track and field athlete)

Two female athletes and one male athlete talked about having extremely high expectations of themselves and their performance, which often resulted in low self-satisfaction or too much self-criticism. While no male mentioned difficulties with

assertiveness, five female athletes talked about lacking assertive behavior and self-confidence in different situations, e.g. in sports, school, or social situations. In concordance with more frequent complaints of psychological disturbances, female athletes more often expressed their wish to work with a sports psychologist.

Only female athletes addressed being dissatisfied with their body appearance. Most of them were dissatisfied with their body sizes and body mass. Two female athletes reported being on a diet at the time of the interview and expressed facing difficulties with their attempts to eat less than normal. They both believed that the pressure for women to keep a low body mass has increased in the past years, both in general society as well as in sports. Some of the girls were frustrated with their athletic figures and would prefer to look 'less muscular and more feminine, especially when socializing with their non-athletic peers. They reported receiving social remarks about their athletic appearance, especially for 'being very muscular' or being 'too big for a female athlete, e.g. "I receive comments from my schoolmates on behalf of my wide shoulders – some of them say I am turning into man," (Female swimmer). While some of the girls didn't put too much attention to such comments, the others believed these remarks negatively affect them.

3.3 Psychosocial level

All athletes placed their parents as the most important people for their current careers. Having difficulties in their relationship with parents was more often mentioned by female athletes, who reported having frequent conflicts with one or both parents (mostly over athletes' obligations, e.g. schoolwork, and house duties); and/or receiving insufficient athletic career support from their parents. They complained that their parents positioned school much higher than sport, or lacked the understanding of their daughter's athletic career, dual career demands, or sport in general as illustrated in the following passage:

I think my father does not believe in the reality of my dreams to become a professional golf player. I mean, it is not that he does not support my athletic work, he does; but I think he sees it more as a hobby. On the other hand, he supports my schoolwork and stresses the importance of having good grades. (Female golf player)

Five female athletes and one male athlete perceived their parents as being too involved in their athletic careers by obtaining high expectations concerning their athletic success or putting them under too much pressure to succeed. Some of these athletes reported that their parents were also professionally involved in their child's sports club, e.g. working as a coach or a club administrator.

Ten participants complained about several negative aspects of their coach's behavior, e.g. giving only negative feedback, shouting, discouraging the athletes, not supporting the athletes or not supporting their dual career investments; having insufficient authority, treating the athletes unequally, and/or not keeping his/her promises. Eight athletes reported their coach was acting unprofessionally by being absent a lot, too passive in his work, not giving them a satisfying amount of feedback about their performance, or forcing them into extreme weight loss.

In their relationship with friends, young athletes' most often identified problem was the lack of time they had for their friends and peers outside sports with female athletes more often complaining over this deficit:

My friends all meet and hang out on Friday and Saturday nights, but I cannot join them although I would like to. I could go out with them on Friday after my training, but I have tournaments on Saturdays, so I can't go, because I need to rest in order to prepare for the tournament. (Female volleyball player)

Two female athletes noted how all of their friends were from sports and how their social network was mainly formed around the sport. They missed having friends from outside of sports and explained that because they spend so much time on their athletic career, they don't have enough opportunities to develop friendly relationships with peers outside of sports. Three girls expressed feeling isolated within their school class; they believed that their frequent absences in school due to their athletic career obligations disabled them from connecting well with other classmates. Female athletes more often than males missed their friends' athletic support while performing and competing, and would prefer a higher level of understanding for their athletic obligations coming from their friends.

With regard to their team relationships, young athletes in this study spoke about conflicts and low cohesion within the team. Some of them perceived a gap existing between old and new players in the team, with older players not accepting the newcomers. Female athletes more often perceived difficulties in their team relationships and talked about tensions with other athletes, girls' gossip, and resentments. These interpersonal conflicts were mainly connected with the team's poor performance, and/or individual team players' negative behavior or lack of motivation. Female team sport athletes believed that conflicts occur more among female athletes than among male athletes. In addition, they believed that conflicts between the players have a greater negative impact on the performance of girls' teams than on boys' teams. They believed that women athletes are more occupied and affected by their interpersonal issues; which illustrates the following quote:

In our team, you cannot say anything to any of our players, because they immediately get upset and affected. If this happens, these things influence the game. This is a team sport, but it is very difficult to play with someone for whom you have negative feelings. (Female handball player)

Considering their intimate relationships; with an exception of one male athlete, only female athletes talked about facing difficulties in this field. Four of them complained that because of their dual career obligations they don't have time for an intimate relationship; and also, how their time constraints of being an athlete and a student withdraw them from possibilities to meet other people. One of them illustrated this with the following quote:

I don't have time for a boyfriend. I am always occupied either with my sport or my school activities. I mean, I could have a boyfriend, but I am either in school, or sleeping/ training/ studying. So there are no real chances to meet somebody interesting. (Female handball player)

While the majority of female athletes didn't perceive the desire to have a boyfriend, four female athletes expressed their wish for an intimate relationship with somebody; preferably also an athlete who would understand their athletic career obligations.

3.4 Academic level

Over a third of participants in this study complained about having too much academic work and obligations. Three athletes were dissatisfied with the secondary education program for student athletes; they perceived that in comparison with their non-athletic peers they receive less academic knowledge. Despite receiving some support for student athletes, six participants estimated their school's organizational support as inadequate and complained about teachers' lack of understanding of student athletes. Some athletes perceived that student athletes are often stereotypically labeled by their non-athletic peers and/or teachers as being less knowledgeable than 'normal' students or being less motivated for school.

The athletes expressed facing challenges when trying to combine their athletic and academic careers. One of the major disadvantages of having a dual career was a constant deficit of time; with more female than male athletes complaining about not having enough time for studying. Because their dual career required a highly energetic input, some athletes complained about the limited amount of energy they were left with. Ten athletes perceived their school and sport as being in a reciprocal relationship; e.g. a bad grade in school negatively influenced their athletic performance and vice versa. More female athletes reported that school activities were taking away their time and energy for sports and that they were sometimes forced to choose between their schoolwork and athletic obligations. One of the females stressed the impact of her parents in this decision to sacrifice training to study with the following citation:

If I have too much work for school, I sacrifice my sport and don't go to practice. My parents told me that 'no school means no training', so I need to take care of my schoolwork. Recently I received a bad grade in one of the subjects in school. As a consequence, I needed to stay at home in the afternoon to study instead of going to the gym. The next day I improved the bad grade, so everything went back to normal again. (Female judoka)

When talking about their academic aspirations and motivation, only female athletes reported having high academic goals. School grades were very important to them and they had high expectations for themselves concerning their academic success. Three female athletes expressed being dissatisfied with their current school success. One male and three female athletes were concerned about their future careers; i.e.

they worried that the sports department does not give them sufficient knowledge, or that their desired subject of study in the future will not allow them to combine studying and sports. Based on the latter, one of the female athletes already decided to continue her education in the USA after finishing high school which would (according to her beliefs) allow her an easier combination of both careers.

4 Discussion

In the development stage, the athletes' focus narrows to one or two sports, and the amount of training as well as the importance of competitions increases (Bloom, 1985; Reints, 2011; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Adolescent athletes in our study supported this specialization and intensification of their athletic work. However, 27% of them perceived their athletic demands were too intense. Female athletes more often complained about their training regime and/or insufficient rest, as well as experienced significant physical and mental exhaustion, which supported the findings of Baron-Thiene and Alferman (2015) who reported that female student athletes more often experience physical exhaustion and express more physical complaints than males which might also be a reason why female adolescent athletes tend to drop out of competitive sport more likely than male athletes. According to Kristiansen et al. (2012) coaches tend to plan training regimes for female athletes based on male stamina. This might be one of the reasons why female athletes in this study more often complained about experiencing physical exhaustion than males did; as well as a possible partial explanation of why girl athletes perceived a greater amount of dissatisfaction with their coach's work and/or believed that their coach does not understand female athletes.

According to Gledhill and Harwood (2014; 2015), multiple agents (i.e., parents, teachers, peers, team-mates, siblings) need to optimally interact to ensure that an optimal talented development and learning environment is created for young athletes. Adolescent athletes in this study identified their parents, coach, peers, teammates, and siblings as being important for their current position as an athlete; however, they also raised facing difficulties in relationships with all these important others. In comparison with boys, girl athletes more often reported having conflicts with their parents, and/or receiving non-optimal parental support for their athletic engagement; whether as insufficient parental involvement and/or interest in their athletic career; or in contrast, by parents being too much involved in their sport.

Female athletes' parents were usually recognized as being more supportive of their daughter's academic careers rather than athletic careers. According to Hellstedt (1987), parental involvement in their child's athletic career may range from under-involvement through moderate involvement to over-involvement. Whereas moderate involvement seems to support and facilitate young athletes' careers; athletes with disinterested parents are more likely to drop out of the sport, and on the other hand, athletes with overinvolved parents may perceive high levels of parental pressure.

In the athlete-coach relationship, only female athletes complained about the coach's negative behavior. Girl athletes in this study often perceived their coach as unable to see them as a whole person with other important domains (e.g., social life, school) in life besides sport. This supports Gledhill and Harwood's (2015) study where female athletes' coaches were viewed as less competent or confident when it came to the psychosocial development of their players; as well as stresses the notion that coaches' knowledge about female adolescent needs is an important strategy for increasing retention among female athletes (Keathley et al., 2013). Since only two female athletes in this study had a female coach and the other female and male athletes were coached by a male coach, this mixed gender diad (female athlete – male coach) could explain why female athletes perceived greater difficulties in their relationship with their coach, especially in terms of communication and understanding. Research (e.g., Rhodes et al., 2008) shows that in adult-youth mentoring relationships males and females tend to respond differently; with men favouring instrumental support and women placing relatively greater value on interpersonal support and intimacy. These findings together with the current study suggest that coaches' understanding of their female athletes' psychosocial development is crucial for an optimal athlete-coach relationship and female athletes' satisfaction in sport. In understanding young women's development female athletes' coaches must enable their athletes enough opportunities for social interaction with their friends, as well as more 'social' sporting opportunities that are not regarded as 'competitive' by athletes (Slater & Tiggeman, 2010). According to girl athletes in our study, perceived insufficiency in social interactions with their peers (e.g., facing lack of time for friends and intimate relationships, not having enough friends outside sport, and/or feeling isolated from their classmates) was reported as one of the greatest disadvantages of having an athletic career. According to Slater and Tiggemann (2010), socializing and having free time seem to be more important for

girls than for boys and thus may impact on girl's decision to play sports. Female athletes in this study put a great emphasis on their relationship with friends and teammates, especially in terms of getting emotional support and understanding, which supports the observations of Rudolf (2002) who found that the form and function of relationships with important others vary across gender and across development. Especially in female peer relationships and friendships, higher levels of self-disclosure, intimacy, and emotional support were found, while male relationships and friendships mainly base on companionship and joint activity. Adolescent female athletes in this study complained also about insufficient athletic support from their non-athletic peers, which is similar to Gledhill and Harwood's (2015) study where female athletes felt they lacked a peer social support network that would help them to lead a disciplined lifestyle. Since the impact of peers on an individual is particularly strong during adolescence, it is especially valuable when (female) athletes are surrounded by a group of peers with healthy behaviors who understand and support their athletic endeavors. A group of teammates or other athletes who lead a similar way of life can represent an important source of athletic support and social interactions for (female) athletes. As previously found by Reints (2011), having friends in sports among teammates or other athletes appeared as a strong source of motivation for girl athletes. On the other hand, relationships with other athletes or teammates appeared also as a source of conflict and perceived stress among girl athletes, especially in team sports. Unlike males, female athletes in our study often expressed additional concerns related to relationships with other teammates (e.g., frequent gossip, jealousy, interpersonal tensions, and conflicts), supporting some previous findings which say that female athletes' perceptions of playing in the team, conflicts are a frequent topic and mainly refer to athletes' performance and relationships (e.g., Holt et al., 2012; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). Rudolf (2002) explains these frequent disruptions in young females' social networks with their characteristics of higher levels of self-disclosure and intimacy. Because of girls' reliance on peers for emotional support, conflicts and changes in interpersonal roles are likely to create higher levels of stress among females than males. For coaches and sport psychology practitioners it is therefore very important to understand these issues, to stimulate a positive group atmosphere in female athletes' teams, and to promote optimal and rewarding interpersonal relationships between the players.

It seems that in comparison with male athletes, female adolescent athletes put more attention to their school work, i.e. talking about their school obligations, future educational plans, and concerns connected to these. At the same time, females in comparison with male athletes more often reported experiencing school-related stress. In combining athletic career with school work, they felt a strong reciprocal influence of both domains, both positive (e.g., success in school stimulated success in sport and vice versa) as well as negative (e.g., decreased amount of time left for studying due to athletic obligations). They possessed high academic motivation and aspirations for the future; however, they were worried whether they will be able to combine both domains and also whether their future athletic career would enable their financial security. Participants' dual career perceptions support the notion that adolescents construct their dual careers in different ways (Ryba, Stambulova, Selänne, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2017). We could say that female adolescent athletes' academic identity is strong and that girls seem to invest an equal amount of energy into their academic career as well as athletic career. On the other hand, it seems that male athletes tend to identify more strongly with the athletic role (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). This is an important notion for all those working with adolescent female athletes, whether as parents, teachers, or coaches; in that supporting female athletes in their dual career investments and providing an optimal setting for females' dual career development is necessary in order to retain them in competitive sport and guarantee them a prosperous future.

There are several limitations in this study, as well as strong points and practical implications for sport psychologists, dual career providers, educational institutions, coaches, and sport organizations. First, this qualitative study offered a high richness of data, both in quality and quantity by taking a holistic approach (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). However, the richness of the data is also one of the weaknesses of this study, since the quantity and diversity of the emerged topics prevented us from taking a more detailed inspection and discussion. Future research should therefore try to consider taking a closer examination of some of the themes which emerged in the article in order to gain a better insight into these specific demands and challenges (female) athletes face. Also, both quantitative and qualitative approaches are encouraged to verify the identified demands and challenges as well as to add additional information about the investigated themes. Second, in order to get a better insight into the athletic career challenges of young (female) athletes, it would be worth examining the sample of prematurely drop-out adolescent athletes to

investigate which demands and difficulties prevented them from continuing with their athletic careers. Third, focusing only on demands and difficulties, this study does not identify strategies or competencies adolescent athletes use in order to cope with their athletic career demands and challenges. Future research should therefore focus on investigating young athletes' competencies, necessary for successful career development.

Practical implications can be taken from this study, which is of importance to (female) athletes, as well as to sport practitioners, coaches, teachers, parents, and others who work with them. First, there is a need to educate and therefore prepare the athletes for their athletic career development at all four levels stressing the possible demands and challenges they might face as they progress through their careers. With female athletes, special attention should be given to informing them about the possible effects of physical maturation on their athletic career performance, healthy lifestyle, and physical self-acceptance. This is particularly important for younger female athletes, before entering their adolescence stage. Second, some of the adversities female athletes face throughout their careers are likely to be reduced if their coaches and other sports practitioners would possess an awareness of female athletes' developmental characteristics and their special needs. In this essence, it seems important to educate coaches and other practitioners working with female athletes about young women's development, and equip them with the necessary skills and competencies to successfully address these issues. In conclusion, we hope this article stimulates thinking about female adolescent athletes' specific demands and challenges, and triggers more scientific research and applied practice on this topic.

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